

COMMENTARY

IS THE FREE WEST IN DECLINE?

"History's Verdict" in Perspective

HANS KOHN

OUR time is dominated by a feeling of unprecedented crisis involving every aspect of political, social, and intellectual life. The very foundations of modern civilization seem imperiled and the "decline of the West," about which philosophers of history from Spengler to Toynbee have been talking since 1914, is now almost a cant term. But this feeling of crisis, of decay and decline, is scarcely unique. Almost every great age and civilization has had its periods of anxiety and loss of confidence. On the eve of the great era of the *pax Romana*, we find Virgil lamenting in his *Georgics*:

For here are right and wrong inverted: so many wars in the world, so many fashions of

"THE decline of the West" is a theme so harped upon in late years that it is on the way to becoming considered an established truth, indeed almost an axiom for all enlightened people, together with the parallel motif that democracy is losing its grip. HANS KOHN here offers a historian's dissent to this prevalent "verdict of history," inviting us to look at the facts in the records, which he suggests have been treated cavalierly by professional defeatists. Dr. Kohn, no stranger to these pages, was born in Prague, and served in the Austrian army in the 1914 war; captured by the Russians, he saw their two revolutions and civil war on the spot. He came to this country in 1931, and is now professor of history at the City College of New York. His latest book is *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology*.

evil; the plough meets not its due honor; our lands, the tillers deported, lie waste, and the crooked pruning-hooks are forged into hard swords. Here Euphrates, there Germany kindles war: even as when from the barriers the chariots burst forth, they gather speed in the course, and the driver, tugging vainly at the bridles, is borne along by the horses and the car heeds not the reins.

The Middle Ages, Renaissance, Reformation, and the period of the French Revolution all had their crises when despairing voices were lifted up to predict the end of the world or the death of civilization. In two respects only, is the present crisis different from all previous ones: owing to the very nature of modern Western civilization, the present crisis is worldwide; and it has sucked into its orbit the hitherto quiescent and "extra-historical" lower classes, who constitute the overwhelming majority.

To a greater extent than we care to acknowledge, perhaps, the transitory successes of the Nazis, and now those of the Communists, have browbeaten us into wondering if Western civilization is faltering and moribund. The "dynamism" of these totalitarian movements has intimidated us, and we have the sinking feeling that they may be the harbingers of a fresh and vigorous, if ruthless, new age which will succeed our failing Western civilization. Along with that often goes the guilty feeling that totalitarian-

ism is somehow our own late-born child. Western society has reached such a point of atomization—many people say—so many classes of people have become rootless wanderers in the anarchy of modern life, that the synthetic, brute unity of the totalitarian movements is the inevitable heir of the bankruptcy of our senile society.

A SOBER examination of the historical record, I believe, will show that all these gloomy forecasts of a declining West are at the very least premature. The contemporary crisis is not so much a crisis within Western civilization as an attack upon it from without. This attack has come, in our time, from Germany and Russia. And—most significant fact of all—these are peripheral areas that never really made part of the modern Western way of life, never assimilated the ideas and institutions that define it. Liberty understood as the inborn rights of the individual against authority; tolerance based upon the recognition of diversity—the open society; parliamentary government; freedom of inquiry—all these things were never firmly founded in Germany or Russia, Italy or Spain. Communism in Russia, Fascism in Italy and Spain, nationalism in Asia* have had one thing in common, politically: they are all a revolt against the leadership of the nations in which modern civilization first took root. Spiritually, they represent a rejection of Western values, which are “unmasked” as hypocrisy.

Fascism and Communism, to be sure, have themselves claimed to be the true guardians of modern Western civilization, its culture, its social justice, and its scientific traditions. In reality, these new movements constitute but the latest in a long and hoary line of despotic regimes; they embody the old xenophobia of closed societies and an old adoration of power. And they use the intellectual and social aspirations and achievements of the West, which they interpret in a distorted way, as a weapon against the spirit itself of modern Western civilization.

*See M. N. Roy, “Asian Nationalism,” *The Yale Review*, Autumn 1952.

II

IN OUR modern Western society with its almost unbroken growth from the late 17th century to World War I, it is Britain that is both the point of origin and the model. The United States of America is the purest expression of that society's political ideals and strength and thereby its most “Western” member. Germany, on the other hand, never fully achieved either emancipation or enlightenment in its national life. Russia is likewise only a “Westernized” (but not a Western) civilization of the same kind that has now spread to Asia.

This “frontier” position of Russia's explains the great attraction she lately exercises upon the Orient. The Russo-Japanese War and the Russian revolution of 1905 were the first events to stir the whole of Asia from China to the Red Sea, and the Russian revolutions of 1917 seemed to speak a message directly to the peoples of Asia and Africa, who felt that they were living under conditions similar to those of Russia. Russia's defection from the Allied side in March 1918, when her capital was transferred from westward-looking St. Petersburg back to Moscow in the interior, signaled the growing estrangement of Asia from the West.

Between Britain, the United States, and parts of Northwestern Europe on the one side, where Western civilization maintains itself unchallenged, and Germany and Russia on the other side, where it has never taken real root, stands France—the country in which the Western democratic revolution is forever being fought, without ever being finally resolved. Authoritarianism, whether reactionary or revolutionary, is always threatening to overwhelm French society, and sometimes does, only to be beaten back again by the constantly renewed forces of French liberalism.

The interaction between a common Western spirit and individual national traditions created the West's intellectual and social climate and shaped its political history. The modern Western spirit is strongest in the countries bordering on the North Atlantic,

where the social structure and moral and intellectual climate favored its rise. But as it passes eastward its strength declines. Communism and fascism could not come to power in the seats and centers of modern Western civilization—Britain, America, and Northwestern Europe—but only on its periphery.

These movements, and the contemporary crisis, would seem then to express, not the "decline of the West," but the very opposite: the failure to be Western enough, to be truly modern. May it not be that what we are witnessing is not the end of Western civilization, due to exhausted energies and decayed institutions, but the growing pains of its youth, a beginning stage in which it still meets checks, frustrations, and temporary reverses?

CONSIDERING how recent are the origins of modern Western civilization, how young it actually is, the crisis it now faces is more probably due to the amazing speed with which it has extended its influence and appeal around the world. Modern Western civilization has its roots in the Greco-Roman West of antiquity and Western Christendom of the Middle Ages. Yet its spirit and outlook were unknown before the 17th century, being based upon the new realities of liberty, science, and tolerance. Its roots go back to Athens, Jerusalem, and Rome, yet it was a new growth that sprang up in London and Amsterdam, Philadelphia and Paris.

In two centuries Western civilization brought about an unprecedented refinement and humanization of customs, a more general participation by all in the opportunities of life, and a great extension of personal liberty and the impartial rule of law. Step by step, the influence of the West spread beyond Northwestern Europe. Russia and the Balkans began to feel it in the 18th century; enlightened rationalism and romantic sentimentalism simultaneously influenced the Scandinavians and the Slavs, the Spaniards and the Greeks. Europe as a cultural unit—from Gibraltar to the Urals, from Bergen to Morea—was a creation of the 18th

century; it had never existed before. One hundred years later, even this framework seemed too narrow for modern Western civilization, with Asia coming within its orbit.

Yet under the surface deep and unreconciled differences of civilization persisted, and they began to reassert themselves in the present century. The resistance of Germany, Russia, and the Asian lands to Western influence, the very violence of their rejection of Western civilization and leadership, testifies to the strength and vitality of the West. Western civilization has frequently been attacked from the outside: in antiquity at the time of the Persian Wars and the Germanic invasions; later on when it was threatened by Arabs, Mongols, and Turks. Twice, under Alexander the Great and again at the beginning of the 18th century, the West itself took the offensive successfully, not only as a conqueror, but as the bearer of a new and unifying civilization. Now again Western civilization is under attack from the outside. But this time the attack seems to come from within, with the anti-Western forces borrowing their rhetoric, the aims they proclaim, and the machines they use, from their opponent. From their contact with the modern West, they know its weaknesses and exploit them; but because its spiritual core still eludes them or has been only imperfectly assimilated, they cannot grasp its enduring strength.

In flat contradiction with the "theory of decline," where the modern West is oldest it is strongest and most successful. Where we find decline is in the peripheral areas, lapsing from their Westernizing efforts of the 19th century into the old intolerance and arbitrary violence. Let us look more closely at Britain, America, and France on the one side, Germany and Russia on the other, to see these things in the concrete.

III

THE Puritan and Glorious Revolutions of 17th-century England laid the foundations of the new civilization of the West; the Enlightenment, radiating from Holland

and France, broadened and universalized its principles. The new trends found their most propitious soil in the English colonies of North America. There the Puritan spirit, surviving the restoration of the monarchy in the mother country, made Locke its philosopher, and the ideal Nature of the 18th-century *philosophes* promised that better man and that good society impossible of realization in Europe's history-ridden and castle-cluttered landscape. The Anglo-Americans were the first to establish a nation on the basis of the new civilization.* Its characteristic features—a pluralistic and open society in place of an authoritarian uniformity of state and faith; reliance on the autonomy of the individual and voluntary association; a rationalistic and humanitarian regard for one's fellow man—gradually asserted themselves as the fruit of a long historical process. In England this type of modern society was the result of a long period of development from the Puritan Revolution to the great Liberal reform administrations; in the United States, it seemed the gift of a benevolent Nature.

BUT in another important area of the West, conditions were markedly different. Eighteenth-century France, authoritarian and absolutist (in spite of an older and more polished literature, a more numerous population, fertile soil, and better communications), contrasted unfavorably with a contemporary England strong in its assertion of individual liberty and religious tolerance. The Glorious Revolution and the establishment of parliamentary government in England almost coincided in time with the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the zenith of monarchical absolutism in France. A French royal edict of April 1757 reaffirmed the death penalty for authors and printers of unauthorized books. Other royal edicts promulgated between 1764 and 1785 forbade the publication of any discussion of public finances, jurisprudence, or religion. Montesquieu and Voltaire were deeply in-

fluenced by the English example; their demands for a reform of government, though ignored by Louis XV and Louis XVI, inspired the enlightened policies of Frederick II of Prussia, Joseph II of Austria, and Catherine II of Russia.

The Revolution of 1789 tried to bridge the gap between rational idealism and obsolete reality by adapting English constitutionalism to French conditions. But the absolutist traditions of the monarchy and Church, and the abstract and uncompromising rationalism of the intellectuals, prevailed from 1792 on. The Glorious Revolution had united England, in spite of the diversity of opinions and interests, through a spirit of pragmatic compromise; the Constitution of the United States did the same for a people of diversified ethnic origins and religious allegiances; whereas the French Revolution of 1793 split France into two eternally warring camps. Robespierre and Napoleon as little understood the nature of modern civil society as the most reactionary followers of Throne and Altar looking back to the authoritarianism of the *ancien régime*. De Tocqueville noted that in the United States, Christianity and liberty seemed to feel at one, whereas in France they were found in opposite camps. The great achievements of 1789—the rights and liberties of the individual, the emancipation of conscience from authority, the open and civil character of society—though they set an example for the entire European continent, were time and again imperiled in France itself. French liberty has been menaced on the left all the way from the Jacobins to the revolutionary syndicalists, from Babeuf to the Communists; on the right, all the way from Joseph de Maistre to Charles Maurras, from Napoleon to Pétain, from Charles X's July Ordinances to the Dreyfus Affair. The French Revolution is "permanent" in the sense that it is always an issue, never having been accepted by significant sections of French society.

But though the achievements of 1789 were never secure in France and had to be defended against periodic attack, they tri-

*See this writer's *The Idea of Nationalism* (1944).

umphantly reasserted themselves time and again. Their very insecurity and their constant reassertion made 19th-century France the inspiring exemplar and bulwark of modern Western civilization on the Continent. At the same time, there were always people ready to predict the "decline of the West." Immediately after the war of 1870, Ernest Renan expressed the fear that:

France and even Britain—who at bottom suffer from the same malady [a weakening of the military spirit and the ascendancy of the spirit of commerce]—will soon be reduced to a secondary role; the stage of the European world will be exclusively occupied by a few colossal powers, the Germans and the Slavs, who have preserved the vigor of the military and leadership principles, and whose struggle will fill the future.

But such a fit of pusillanimity did not afflict other French liberals, and Renan himself threw it off when the first shock of the defeat of 1870 had worn off.

Since the 18th century, no other great nation on the Continent has had a public opinion so like that of the English-speaking countries as France. Its sense of proportion, respect for reason and practicality, vigilant interest in politics, and distrust of authority repeatedly prevailed over the attraction of the authoritarian theories that the French intellectuals brilliantly formulated, and over the ambitions of military heroes temporarily acclaimed by an enthusiastic populace.

IV

A STRONG public opinion of this kind has existed neither in Germany nor in Russia. In the 18th century, intellectual Germany had been an integral part of Western Europe. But the Enlightenment, which transformed the political and social structure of Britain and France, remained in Germany a purely moral and metaphysical movement. The political and social structure of the German lands was modernized only in the second half of the 19th century, when the influence of the Enlightenment's humanitarian individualism and tolerant rationalism were no longer dominant. Powerful tendencies in German thought, arising out

of the war against Napoleon, rejected the civil society of England and America and the French Declaration of Rights of 1789, proclaiming instead the superiority of "indigenous" German thought and morality.

Only a few years before, all of Germany's greatest minds—Lessing and Wieland, Klopstock and Herder, Schiller and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Goethe and Kant—despite all their differences, had upheld the pacifism and cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment. In the same year in which Goethe celebrated America's freedom from the fetters of a feudal past, he spurned the romantic nonsense of Gothicism. "Greek mythology," he declared, "is the most highly conceived embodiment of the best and purest kind of humanity. It merits greater praise than an ugly diabolism and witchery that could only spring from a confused imagination in somber and anxiety-ridden periods. . . ." He regarded French culture as the most vital of his time, and expected it to exercise a great moral influence on the world. With Olympian loftiness he surveyed the civilizations of the world and preferred the ancient Greek and modern French. The intensity and splendor that German intellectual life attained at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century it attained as an integral part of Western civilization.

But after 1812 an anti-Western attitude began to predominate in Germany. Though the "Westernizers"—to borrow a term from Russian and Asian intellectual life—were always numerous, they were unable to influence decisively the political and intellectual development of Germany. Politically, the center shifted from Western Germany, which had once made part of the Roman Empire, to the eastern marches that the Germans had conquered from the Slavs in the later Middle Ages. There, on the exiguous and sandy soil of Brandenburg, a Spartan effort of will and discipline created the great military power of Prussia. Prussian Junkerdom brought the methods of rationalist efficiency to the service of an irrational idolization of power; "reason of state" provided the basis not only for the political

but also for the moral and intellectual life of the nation. The supposed necessities of the state became the supreme consideration in domestic and foreign policy. Whatever served the state was good—such was the higher Prussian morality. A number of German intellectuals found in the Prussian army, with its spirit of fellowship and discipline, security and devotion to the common good, the model of a “true” socialism.

THIS idolization of power and the state—to which the greatest German philosopher and the greatest German historian of the 19th century contributed—was supported by the seemingly contradictory “individualism” of German romanticism. “Western” individualism is rational and Christian: in 17th-century England it based itself on the religious conception of the dignity and equality of all individuals created in the image of God; in 18th-century France, on the rational conception of the equal rights of all men endowed with a reason that is one for the whole of mankind. Romantic individualism in Germany, however, stressed the unique and exceptional character of the individual, his peculiar endowments and rights. For Goethe personality had meant “to realize within oneself the idea of mankind, the timeless essence of the human race, and to raise oneself to the level of a symbolical representative of eternal humanity.” Personality in this sense willingly submitted to universal standards; but in the German romantic meaning, the individual became a law unto himself and his passions and desires, provided they were strong enough, were regarded as self-validating. Later on, the state or the nation, understood as an organic individual of a higher kind, was endowed with the same unique character and rights.

The victories of Bismarck and the triumphs of German arms up to the last months of World War I seemed to confirm this belief in Germany’s moral and intellectual superiority over the West. Leading German intellectuals of the period expressed it, men of a generally liberal turn of mind and fully

conversant with world history and literature. In 1915, in his *Händler und Helden*, Werner Sombart made this comparison of “English shopkeepers” and “German heroes”:

German thought and feeling expresses itself first and foremost in a complete rejection of everything that even approaches English or West European thought and feeling. With complete antipathy, with the deepest disdain, the German spirit rises up against the English-born ideas of the 18th century. German thinkers have at all times rejected all forms of utilitarianism and eudaimonism. The German heroic concept lays emphasis on duty; it looks on the state not as a contrivance for securing happiness, but as an organism, a spiritual whole.

In 1917 Thomas Mann approached this same German-Western antagonism from a different side. Writing on Dostoevsky, whom he regarded as the representative of the true Russia (which is why he was convinced that Russia after the democratic revolution of March 1917 could not become a democratic and socialist republic on the Western pattern), Mann pointed out, in his *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, the common opposition of Germany and Russia to the West:

Has anybody ever understood the human meaning of nationalism in a more German way than the greatest Russian moralist? Are not the Russian and German attitudes towards Europe, the West, civilization, politics, and democracy closely akin? Haven’t we Germans also our Slavophiles and Westernizers? If spiritual affinity can be the basis and justification of political alliances, then Russia and Germany belong together; their agreement now, their union in the future, has been since the beginning of this war the desire and dream of my heart. It is more than a desideratum: it is a political and spiritual necessity if the Anglo-American alliance should endure.

THE unexpected defeat of 1918 only deepened the crisis of Western civilization in Germany. For disillusioned German youth, the Western values so eagerly opposed and almost vanquished only a short while ago offered no foundation on which to build a new life. Those of the older generation who upheld the ideals of the West lacked the strength to act upon them under the difficult conditions that prevailed. The English

novelist D. H. Lawrence, traveling in Germany in 1928, wrote to a friend:

Immediately you are over the Rhine, the spirit of the place has changed. . . . It is as if the life had retreated eastwards. As if the Germanic life were slowly ebbing away from contact with Western Europe, ebbing to the desert of the East. And there stand the heavy, ponderous round hills of the Black Forest . . . you look at them from the Rhine plain, and know that you stand on an actual border, up against something. . . . So must the Roman soldiers have watched these black massive round woods. A fear of their own opposite. . . . Something has happened. The old spell of the old world has broken, and the old bristling savage spirit has set in, a still older flow has set in. Back, back to the savage polarity of Tartary, and away from the polarity of civilized Christian Europe. . . . Not that the people are actually planning or plotting or preparing. I don't believe it for a minute. Something has happened to the human soul, beyond all help. The human soul recoiling from unison, and making itself strong elsewhere. The ancient spirit of prehistoric Germany coming back, at the end of history.

Three years later the German philosopher Karl Jaspers declared, in *The Spiritual Situation of Our Time*, that Germany—following Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Spengler—felt itself face to face with nothingness.

People are coming to believe that everything is breaking down; there is nothing that can't be questioned; nothing that is real stands the test; it is an endless whirl that consists in cheating others and oneself by means of ideologies.

Faced with this nihilism—the roots of which went back to the Romantics and Hegel, to historicism and materialism, to thinkers and movements in no way nihilistic themselves—the Germans turned away completely from Western civilization and sought an absolute security in the unconsciousness of the blood and of past history, of the soil and of dogmatic faith.

But when the new war against the West again ended in disastrous defeat, the Western spirit was still a strong enough element in the German tradition to awaken in many Germans a desire to return to Goethe—the name signifying not so much the man and

the poet in his unique greatness as a temper and state of mind. The outward conditions for a Western reorientation of Germany seemed auspicious: Prussia no longer existed as a state, the wish that the Prussian Herder had expressed in 1769—"States like Prussia will never be happy until they are divided up"—having been fulfilled; and Germany's center of gravity had shifted back to the West where it had been during most of her history. Many elements in Germany which for a hundred years had sneered at the moral and spiritual debility of the civilization of the West, now seek Germany's salvation in a revival of that spirit inside her borders. For this venture to succeed, Germany must break with the precedents of 1813, 1848, and 1870, and place individual liberty above the power of a unified nation-state.

V

THE situation was different in Russia. Peter I had tried to overcome by force the inertia and backwardness which he found among the Russians. A century later, after the Napoleonic Wars, Western ideas began to penetrate more deeply into the consciousness of the small educated class. The discrepancy that was revealed between Western ideals and the actual conditions of Russia led to a quest for the meaning of Russian history and an examination of Russia's relation to Europe. Unfamiliar with the social and political realities of the West, judging it irresponsibly as a purely intellectual entity, as an idea and only as an idea, many Russians began to view Europe with a critical eye that caught the weaknesses but missed the strength. The Russian intelligentsia's greater remoteness from the West, their extremist disdain of common sense and "bourgeois" attitudes, caused them to exceed the Germans in their superiority feelings and apocalyptic expectations. Thomas G. Masaryk, who knew Russia better than any other contemporary thinker, deplored the unself-critical boastfulness and lack of moderation in much of Russian thought. He found the Russian rationalists as mystically inclined as the Orthodox theologians; in turn-

ing away from traditional Orthodoxy they had only changed the object of their faith. A century ago Alexander Herzen saw the underlying affinity between the Russian autocratic government and the Russian revolutionary movement:

It has been remarked that an opposition leading a frontal attack upon a government always has, in an inverted form, something of the character of its antagonist. I think there is some justification for the fear that the Russian government is beginning to have of Communism: Communism is the Russian autocracy turned upside down.

The word "nihilism" was first popularized in the early 1860's by Turgenev in his novel *Fathers and Sons*, which described a younger generation that finds not "a single convention of our present-day existence, in family or social life, that does not call for complete and ruthless rejection." The "nihilists" called themselves "new men" or "thinking realists"; but they were as unrealistic and absolutist in their materialism and negativism as the older generation had been in its idealism and Slavophilism. An extreme optimism inspired the Russian youth and their teacher, Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky: "We are still ignorant, but we shall learn—we shall become brothers and sisters." But through the dialectics of extremism, they arrived at the very opposite of liberty: "After having started from unlimited liberty," Shigalev says in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, "I finally arrived at unlimited despotism."

Yet in spite of all the difficulties, Western influence was slowly gaining in Russia, and Russian society underwent a transformation after 1880. World War I and the defeat of the Russian armies made the reform of Russian society an immediate necessity before the Russian people were ready for it. The Westernizing revolution of March 1917 was followed only a few months later by a mobilization of the un-Europeanized masses. Masaryk saw from the beginning that Lenin's revolution had destroyed the hopes for the Europeanization of Russia. He regarded Leninism as a product of Russian backwardness, and its theory of revolution,

in which he detected much of Bakunin, as primitive and barbaric. "An unpolitical, wholly unscientific infallibility is the basis of the Bolshevik dictatorship," he wrote in 1920; "a regime that quails before criticism and fears to recognize thinking men stands self-condemned."

VI

IN THE second quarter of the 20th century the unexpected had happened. Modern civilization—based upon the rights of the individual, tolerance of diversity, and freedom of inquiry—lost much of the ground it had gained in the preceding one hundred years. This temporary decline was abetted by the transformation which some fundamental Western concepts underwent in the climate of Central and Eastern Europe and Asia: the nation-state of the West, born out of a struggle by the people for constitutional liberties and the tolerance of opposition, had meant a society of free citizens based on laws; whereas the new nationalism, stressing collective power and national unity, tended to mean independence from foreign domination rather than liberty at home.

A disregard of individual rights and an extreme utopian impatience characterized intellectual and economic developments in the extra-Western areas. In the United States, Britain, Switzerland, and Scandinavia—the "capitalistic" countries—social reforms secured a high standard of living for the working class and their participation in political life. In Russia, Italy, Germany, and Spain, the anti-"plutocratic" movements, which were fundamentally anti-Western and represented in varying degree an amalgamation of "nationalism" and "socialism," turned the nation into an armed camp. "Socialism" was expected to beget a new man who would rise triumphant over egotistic "individualism." The emphasis placed on the collectivity instead of the individual, on force instead of compromise, on salvation instead of responsible realism, combined with an overestimation of the possibilities of a rationalized efficiency in the state and economy, encouraged an expectation that utopias could be

set up here and now, or at least in the very near future. Existing society and civilization were distrusted and contemned. Faith in the magic power of national or social revolution and the currency of all sorts of chiliastic sentimentalities led to the invention of new social myths which demanded group loyalty based upon homogeneity of origin, similarity of conditions of life, and supposed identity of interest. Nationalities and classes were set apart and declared to be irrevocably different and antagonistic; to fulfill their destinies they needed the leadership of daring minorities who understood the "mission" with which they had been "entrusted" by history.

In the summer of 1940 Europe seemed lost to Western civilization. The "young" and "anti-capitalistic" nations, under the leadership of Hitler and Stalin, Mussolini and Franco, ruled the length and breadth of the continent, with the exception of the Swiss and Swedish enclaves. The "old" and "decaying plutocracies" seemed routed. Yet Britain held firm, and together with the United States went on to liberate much of Europe. Though Western civilization had lost in geographical extent, it gained in historical self-understanding from the ordeals it underwent. It learned to distrust the hypnotizing power of the incantatory oversimplifications. It had cast off the easy illusions of the 19th century. The strength of the forces that always threatened Western civilization was now better understood.

VII

THE West's encounter with other civilizations brings not only a threat, it is also an experience that may set free new creative energy. Modern civilization in the 19th century believed itself so unchallenged that a smug overestimation of material progress threatened to smother that independence of personality so essential to the Western spirit. This spirit had grown out of a disquiet, an intellectual "inquietude," a pioneering spontaneity of the human mind that was not afraid of loneliness and dissent. The French scholar Paul Hazard, who in his *La Crise*

de la Conscience Européenne, 1680-1715, described some of the birthpangs of the modern West, defined it as "a thought which is never satisfied. Without self-pity, it ceaselessly pursues its two quests, one towards happiness, the other, which is even more indispensable and dear to it, towards truth. Scarcely has it found an estate that satisfies this double requirement when it becomes aware, when it knows, that it still has only an insecure grip on something temporary and relative; and it returns to that desperate search which is its glory and its torment."

Communism, fascism, and other authoritarian and dogmatic creeds wish to relieve men of this glory and torment of maturity. They may make life "easier" and create a type of "well-adjusted" man, though this is very doubtful. They may give material and psychological security—though in no country as yet have they shown any real signs of providing either. They may avoid economic crises, though for the most part they create historical ones. But for modern Western man this proffer of regimented bliss holds little attraction, nor does he, except for a small defeatist minority, believe in the imminent doom of total crisis. The events of the 20th century have destroyed his complacency. They have led him to study and scrutinize the roots, premises, and implications of his intellectual and social attitudes; the humanities and the history of ideas have assumed a new importance. In their light he begins to view the crisis in historical perspective. In the hour of danger he feels the need for a closer unity of the nations bordering on the North Atlantic, the birthplace of modern civilization. He wishes to transcend narrow nationalisms that are inconsistent with the best traditions of the modern West. With all its promises and dangers, modern civilization appears to him as a young and recent venture, the possibilities of which have in no way been exhausted. Far from the West's having passed into its senescence, as all the criers of doom have been telling us, we have good grounds for asserting the conviction that it is only just now entering into the period of its vigorous maturity.